

### The narrative of militancy: a case study of Swat, Pakistan

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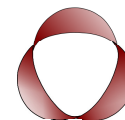
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Research Article

## The Narrative of Militancy in Swat, Pakistan

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**Abstract:** Unlike other faith-based conflicts, the militancy in Swat seems unique, as militants used religion for promoting their agenda and giving voices to the grievances of the poor people through a popular narrative likely without knowing narratology. Using narratives and narratology as a theoretical framework, this qualitative study is an effort to understand the essence of militants' narrative in Swat and the mechanism through which they steered it up until the time it gained verisimilitude. Conducting 73 semi-structured interviews, the study finds that it was a planned strategy of the militants that popularized them in Swat, while they later lost this support due to their atrocities against general populace. The militants used the socially and culturally constructed narrative through FM radio and motivated the masses to follow their ideology and brand of Islamic Sharia. The study concludes that the formulation and popularization of social narratives play vital roles in social movements and conflicts to muster popular support for promoting vested interests that can be used against the state and general public.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics; human security; militancy; narrative; Pakistan; Swat

### 1. Introduction

Since 9/11, the international community has become very anxious about radical ideologies, as this has led to the narrative-based religious militancy that created a new security dilemma across the world [1]. Interestingly, conflict studies in the 1980s reveal that two out of 64 militant groups at that time were religiously motivated, while this number increased to 26 out of 56 conflicts during 1990s [2]. This sudden increase has been attributed to the success of narratives floated by militants in societies across the globe [3]. The recent narratives, promoted by religious based militants around the world, have their inspirational base in the dogma of Al Qaeda [4]. Al Qaeda's ideology is articulated in its

“single narrative”, composed of explanations that give a new and attractive image of the world to its supporters, as the purpose of life. This portrayal provides its followers with a cause for their existence in their surroundings [5].

Swat Valley in Pakistan is a particularly horrible example of religious militancy, where militants gained control of the area for almost two years. The success of militants in Swat cannot be fully explained in terms of military victory; rather it was the victory of a narrative, which led people of Swat to follow the militants' footprints [6]. In retrospect, the narrative of Al Qaeda was borrowed and adapted by Taliban in 1994 in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas [7], which was re-borrowed and adjusted to militants' strategic needs in Swat by Fazlullah. Using the specific socio-cultural environ-

ment, the leader of Tehrik e Taliban Swat (TTS) successfully established his influence in Swat until the government of Pakistan started military operations against him in 2009 [8]. What happened in Swat was nothing new, but instead a repetition of what had been happening in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan for a long time [9]. The first wave of religious extremism in Swat was felt in the mid 1990s, spearheaded by *Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi* (TNSM) of *Maulana Sufi* Muhammad, who pleaded for the need to address the slow and inefficient judicial system in Swat [10]. It was the powerful narrative of TNSM which mustered more than 10,000 fighters into Afghanistan to fight US forces during Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 [11]. In the subsequent years *Maulana Sufi* Muhammad lost ground in Swat, perhaps due to lack of a sound strategic base. However, by early 2005, his son-in-law Fazlullah and his followers regained popularity in Swat through the use of FM radio (8). Initially, the FM radio and motivational speeches of TNSM stimulated the general masses to support the extremist elements in Swat [12]. Imperatively, this occurrence in Swat can simply be attributed to the strong ideological based narrative, which was delicately blended with political motives of TNSM [13]. It was a typical militant methodology, one which identifies and stresses the “traditional politics, i.e., injustice, poverty, access to resources, exploitation and corruption for the public attention” [14]. As is often the case with extremist organizations across the world, religion was used to justify the brutality (11). Militancy in Swat strongly affected the peace and development in the area [15]. Terrorism in Swat brought harassment, destruction, suicide attacks and the senseless killing of innocent people [16]. It disturbed the inhabitants, damaged infrastructure, caused a decline in economic well-being, brought instability, and ripped the social fabric of society [17]. The difference between the narratives of Tehrik e Taliban Swat (TTS) and those of other radicalized militants can be found in TTS’s strong linkage with Swat’s historical legacy, prevailing socio-cultural environment and hermeneutical confusion of general public who were equating the militants as a rebirth of the rule of *Waal e Swat* [18], the last ruler of Swat state, which is still revered by locals in the area. Thus, the narrative constructed by TTS was more vibrant, inclusive, planned and attractive to the general masses [19].

### 1.1. Concepts of Narrative and Narratology

Narratives are fundamentally “compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn” [20]. According to George Dimitriu, “narratives are a resource for political actors to construct a shared meaning to shape perceptions, beliefs and behavior of the public”, they present a composition through which people are arrayed in a specific direction by giving them an understanding of the past, and are an action plan for the present and hope for the bright future [21]. Narratives are subjective accounts of events told to listeners. They are linguistic

forms of “lived experience” affecting both the narrator and the listener [22]. Narratology assumes that the way in which individuals experience themselves and their situations is “constructed” within culturally mediated, social interactions [23]. To study social phenomena through the lens of narratology, some important parameters outline the narratological explanations. Firstly, it negates the absoluteness of the reality in accordance with postmodernism [24]. Thus, it creates room for different interpretations and appeals to hermeneutics of the individuals. The meanings thus constructed are in line with a specific social, political, and cultural environment in which the person resides. Secondly, narratives inspire the creation of meanings in human minds, which lead their actions. Therefore, stories in a society are the reflections of what people would do or are likely to do [25]. Thirdly, a single narrative may act as a strategic narrative, however “people are not defined by a single narrative; rather, they live with many narratives simultaneously, such as work, sport, socializing, and family” [26]. Fourthly, culture and the prevailing situation is the place where narrative acts and people react to it, which makes the cultural environment crucial for narrative construction and success. In narratology, culture is operationalized as the most influential factor affecting people’s lives [27]. Finally, the development of narrative from its ideological basis to localization and the touch of personal flavor make the narratives distinct from each other, both in their making and impact.

Understanding social behavior by providing conceptual relevancy and linguistic understanding to the social theory through narratives becomes the most important part of narratives. This is because of what Labov (2006) calls conceptual narrativity, which is defined by *temporality*, *spatiality*, and *emplotment*, as well as *relationality* and *historicity*. The challenge in conceptualizing narrativity lies in devising a vocabulary that can be used to reconstruct and plot over time and space the ontological narratives and relationships of historical actors, the public and cultural narratives that inform their lives [28].

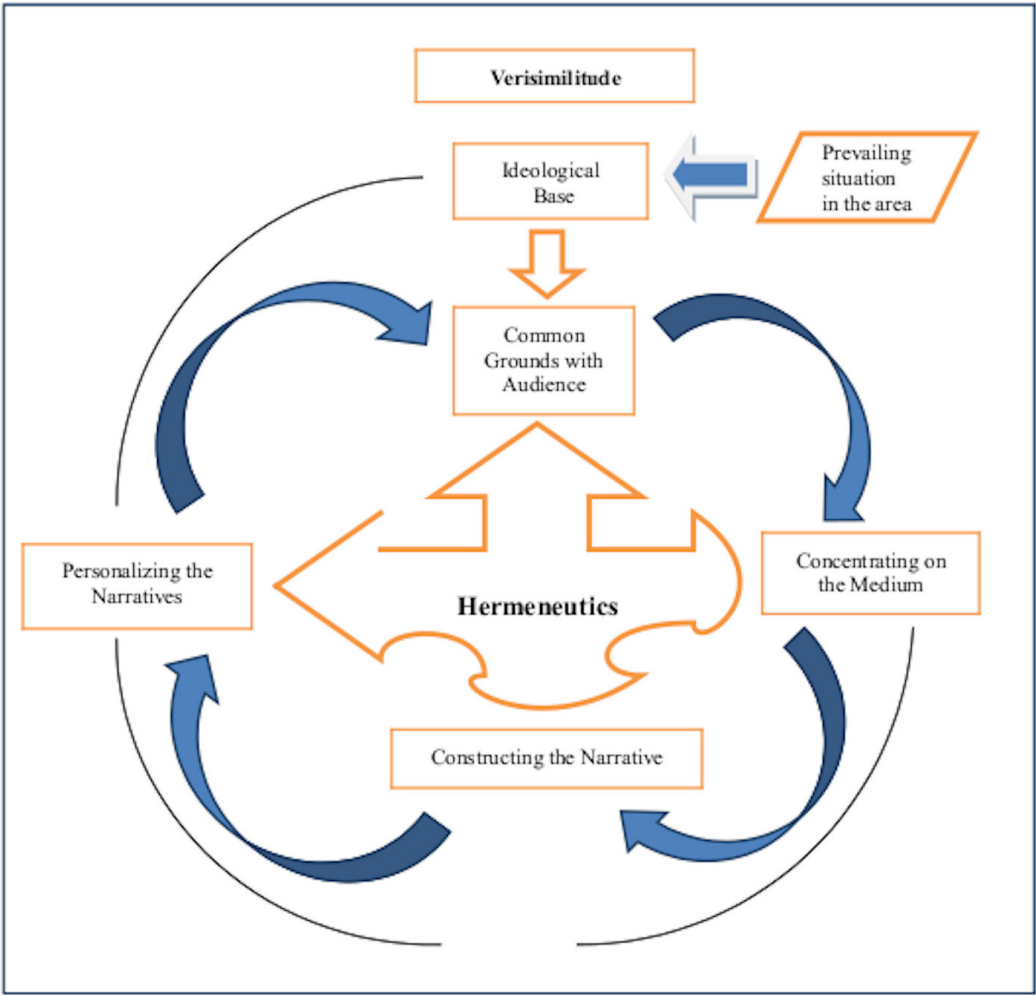
In fact, the physical presence of militants in any similar conflict situation is always supported by their ideological narrative. Thus, to counteract the process of militancy, it is essential to comprehend the magnetism of the narrative or the “messages” which they float (11). Many scholars, like Muhammad Fayaz (2011), Muhammad Sajjad (2013), Rafi (2017), and Javed (2015), have related the Swat conflict to militants’ narratives. Mostly, these scholars have attributed the militants’ narrative in Swat to the implementation of Islamic *Sharia*, but there is hardly any study which describes the stepwise construction of militants’ narrative in Swat specifically, in line with narratological parameters. Therefore, the phenomena of terrorism in Swat needs to be studied within the frame of scientific knowledge, perceptions and the declared militants’ narratives to understand the mystery through which militants convinced the people of Swat to accept them on the political scene. After militants gained control of the area, terror activities made the people hostage to militancy. Ironically, the success of the militants

resulted in a human security crisis in Swat in contrast to the expectations of local population. Before their control, however, it was not the militancy of the militants but the narrative which they floated that attracted and convinced people. Although the literature identifies different narratological standings of militants in Swat, the general public in Swat as well as in Pakistan still wonders why the militants' narrative was so attractive to the people in Swat. If it was just a political stunt, then why politicians aren't as effective as the militants were? If it was religious dogma, then why weren't religious figures regarded as saviors of peoples' political rights before and after the conflict? This study is an effort to uncover those delicate links which led to the militants' narrative formulation and its success in Swat. To do this, the study evaluates the narrative construction mechanisms of militants in Swat and analyzes the push factors that fostered their narrative in public.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

This study is guided by the concept of "Narratology". From its advent in the 1960s, narratology has been an interdisci-

plinary project with many approaches to both narrative and narrative theory [29]. Using the tenants of narratology, we have developed a theoretical framework (Fig 1) for better understanding of the narrative of militancy in Swat. As shown, the prevailing situation is supplemented by the ideological base by narrative mentors. Then, common ground with the target audience is exploited by propagating it through a suitable medium, which in its due course constructs a narrative. The narrative then is personalized by its proponents and a new social reality is constructed. Hermeneutics, which is the subjective interpretation of narrative by the audiences and the verisimilitude (believability) of the narrative instead of its reality, play vital roles in the construction and success of the narrative. Brockmeier and Meretoja claim that hermeneutics plays a particularly vital role in narrative explanations: "...we propose viewing narrative as a hermeneutic practice in itself, a practice of meaning-making. This practice or perhaps better, this plethora of practices is of crucial significance for complex processes of interpretation that underlie, for instance, our ideas of self and identity" [30].



**Figure 1.** Narrative construction mechanism.

### 3. Methodology

As this study focuses on the social construction of militants' narratives, its overall approach lies within the realm of a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism is traced back to German scholars including Edmund Husserl (phenomenology) and Wilhelm Dilthey (14). Constructivism implies that realities are socially constructed. Thus, the fundamentals of constructivism are to study mental interpretations, called hermeneutics [31], which are central to this study. The study combines this overall approach with a focus on discourse analysis. Developed in the 1970s, discourse analysis assumes that there is much more being conveyed when individuals communicate than simply giving information. It goes beyond plain meanings and explores what individuals or cultures "achieve through words" [32]. The reason for employing these two approaches is to comprehend the contextual environment in Swat where militants formulated and steered their narrative. This research is qualitative in order to be able to interpret contextual elements and understand a particular geographical setting [33].

The study area of this research work is Swat district. Swat was chosen for this study based on the strategic use of narratives by militants to gain control in the area in the late 2000s, resulting in severe losses of life, property and livelihood [34]. Swat is an administrative district in the *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa* (KP) province of Pakistan near its Afghanistan border. Until 1969, Swat was a princely state of Indian sub-continent and was merged with Pakistan after partition. Saidu Sharif is the capital of Swat and Mingora city is the main hub of business and social activities in the valley. Towards the north of Swat valley is Chitral and Gilgit-Baltistan, Dir and Mardan towards the west and south, while River Indus towards its east. Administratively, Swat is part of Provincially Administered Tribal Area (PATA) of KP province. PATA is a hilly region with a total area of 5337 sq. km, and a population of 7.6 million [35]. There are seven *tehsil* (administrative units) in Swat district. Four villages were selected in total from four of the *tehsil* of Swat, based on the impacts of conflict on them. *Tehsils* included Babuzai, Matta, Kabal, and Barikot.

Semi-structured interviews were our main tool of investigation. For this purpose, a carefully compiled set of interview questions was developed to guide the interview sessions. To be able to carry out discourse analysis, the questions were open-ended, allowing the respondents to share their perceptions regarding the situation and opening

up for debates on the issues brought to light. Thus, the interview questions served as a guide for the exploration of discourse rather than as a strict questionnaire that might limit the responses to pre-determined topics. Audio-visual aids were used during the interviews and the three authors from the same ethnic background as the respondents transcribed the interview recordings themselves.

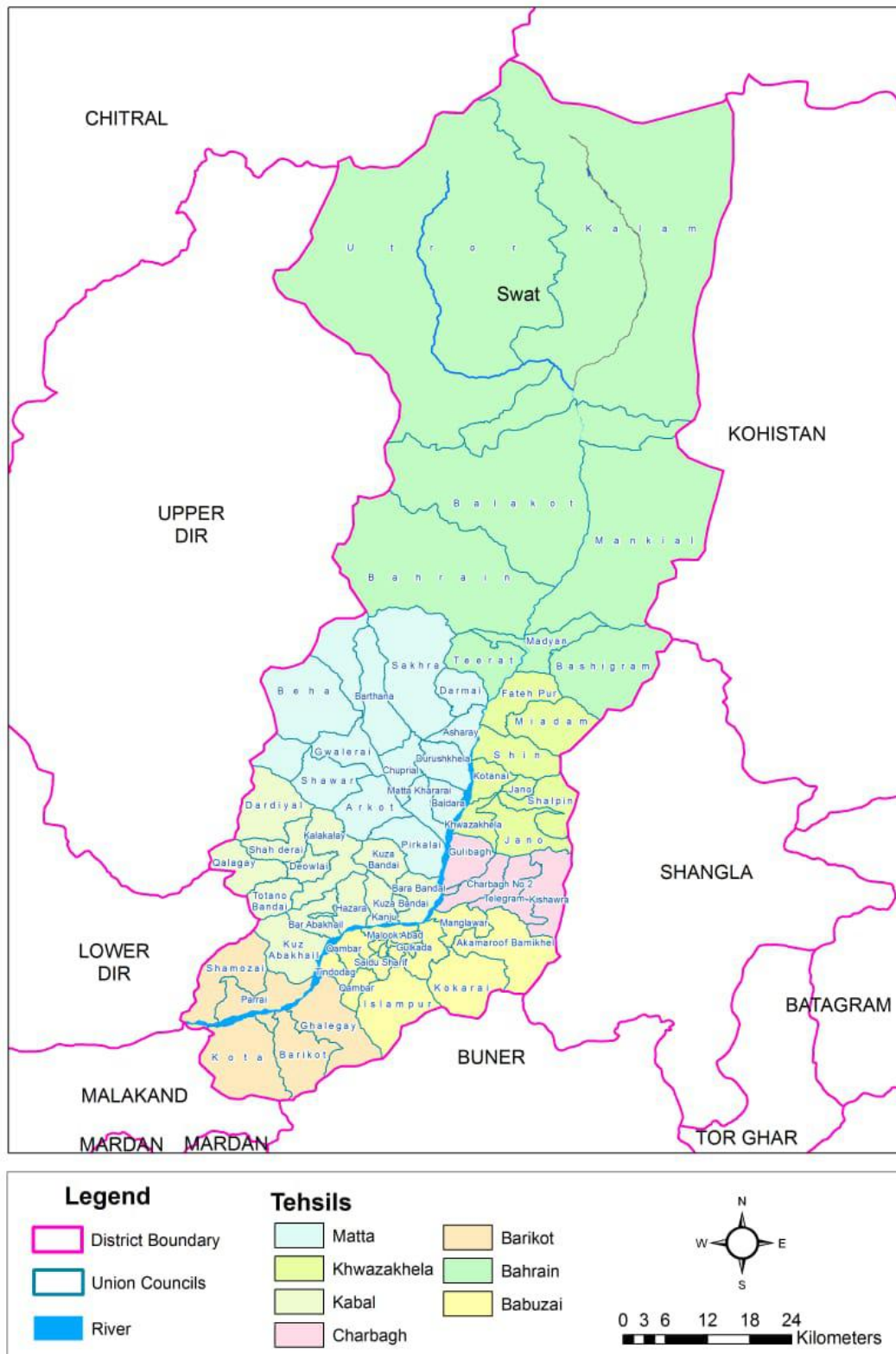
A total of 73 semi-structured interviews and one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were conducted. Due to special security circumstances in Swat, snowball sampling technique was used to reach out to respondents. 40 interviews were conducted in the selected four villages. Ten respondents were selected from each selected village. The respondents included: key persons (village elders), religious figures, affected families, men and women who were indoctrinated by the speeches of militants on FM radio and families which were against the militants during the conflict times. To make this study more representative and cross sectional, 33 interviews were conducted out of the study area in Swat district including intellectuals, politicians, doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, landlords, civil and armed forces members. The Army respondents included both those currently serving and those who served during the conflict. District administration respondents included: Assistant Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, District Police Officer, and education officers (male and female). The FGD was conducted in University of Swat, which included both students and faculty members from Department of Social and Gender Studies and Department of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Hospitality management. As for secondary data, official publications, books, journals, periodicals, newspapers and internet sources were consulted.

### 4. Discussion and Analysis

The narrative of militancy in Swat created conditions which led to a devastating conflict in the area that affected the whole region and resulted in a human security dilemma. However, the primary sufferers were the dwellers of Swat who faced the brunt of this militancy. This section presents and discusses the data and findings of the study. It begins with a description of the origins of the militants and then discusses their narrative and strategy of steering this narrative. The last part of this section discusses the political agenda of the militants and their attitude towards women during the conflict.



## District Swat



**Figure 2.** Map of District Swat [36].

#### 4.1. Origin of the Militants in Swat

Data reveals that people in Swat have their doubts about the origin of the militants. In the same interview, respondents would narrate two different and conflicting stories, one referring to how the militants gradually developed their stature among the locals in Swat and the other a refusal to believe that militants were locals from Swat. The majority of the respondents were of the opinion that the militants were outsiders and planted. There were, however, many exceptions. A local scholar commented, "I am not agreeing to the claim that militants were outsiders. Young local boys from poor families were given guns and these deprived lot started committing crimes against the locals. They robbed nine banks on a single day." The women respondents were of the opinion that most of the militants were from the Swat area but some of the militants were not Swati from their appearance. Respondents from administration, both civil and military, were sure about the identities of militants and supported the idea that majority of the militants were from local areas. Most of the respondents agreed that militants coined their own myths, portraying themselves as saviors of the locals. They agreed that those myths gained ground in the general masses and helped the militants to attract more audiences. Respondents from the villages accepted that during that period, they used to believe that *Maulvi Fazlullah* and his followers had supernatural powers, although the militants never claimed such power. "Once *Maulana Sahab* was going on horseback and an army person tried to shoot him. But whenever he would take aim, he would fail to see him on horseback, rather he would see the Holy book riding the horseback", a local bus driver narrated this story, which he heard about *Fazlullah* when he went to attend his address.

The first observation which struck the researchers during the course of this study in Swat was the helpless looks of the Swati respondents during the interviews, as they expressed confusion and disbelief that *Fazlullah* could be of the caliber to either deceive them or manage such a sophisticated strategy single handedly. When the dust settled in the post conflict Swat and common people clearly visualized the militants' planning during the conflict period, the locals felt more and more confused, as it was widely believed during the conflict times that the militants were simple religious people who wanted an Islamic system in Swat to deliver justice. After analyzing the collected data, it can safely be said that most of the militants were from three different streams. One stream came from the local religious leaders, the other from deprived working class and the third included militants from other parts of the country. The leadership role was primarily in the hands of the religious leaders and the workforce, while the foot soldier role was performed by the local youth. The strategic input was mainly given by the militants coming from outside areas including the tribal belt of Pakistan and perhaps connected to Al-Qaeda. It seems likely that the actions of the militants and their ruthlessness confused the locals about the militants' identity more than their purpose of being in Swat.

Interestingly, people's perception during the initial days of the conflict was totally different.

In Swat, like other *Pakhtun* areas, religious figures are considered innocent and anti-violence. For this reason, significant donations were given to the militants in Swat from the public during their initial phase. People also accept that *Fazlullah* and most of his accomplices were locals, but when they see the amount of suffering and brutalities, they become confused. It is obvious that people of the area did not consider the militants as having any political agenda, but rather were considered to be a religiously-motivated simple crowd that wanted an Islamic system. However, when the political agenda of the militants unfolded as the establishment of a state within a state, the locals were taken by surprise and they refused to accept the militants as being local. This was also the case where the economically-deprived poor were recruited as 'foot soldiers'. The ruthlessness which the militants showed towards women and landlords reveals the internal restlessness of the deprived class in Swat, rather than any other phenomena. As *EH Dance* (1960) mentioned regarding the post WWII scenario in Europe where the common rhetoric of people was "how could we do it?", the same process is prevailing in the post conflict Swat, where people are not ready to take the blame of what their support to militants did in Swat.

#### 4.2. Militants' Narrative

The messages of militants that formed their narrative played a vital role in the militants' success in Swat. Most of the respondents, with the exception of lawyers and military personnel, viewed the militants as icons of religiosity, and people never considered them having any hidden agenda. When asked about what the militants use to say in their sermons, a teacher commented, "Everyone loves Islam and peace here and it is also true that everyone is weary of the current political and social situation in the country. What would you do if someone says he is correcting everything without any personal interest"? Another local from a villager said, "They (militants) were very elaborative about the state of affairs in the country. He was convincing in telling us about the ideal lives of the Prophet (PBUH) and his Companions that they want to implement here in Swat in the name of Sharia". An employee of a local NGO explained along the same lines, "Poverty, injustice, social evils, bad governance and then the dawn of a new era, what was wrong in listening to it? We were hypnotized. He and his followers were enchanting. What they were saying was not un-Islamic. It was the portrayal of the society in the context of present times along with a solution..." "His simple message was that we are not following the path of Allah as Americans are hindering our way. So America is the root of all ills which the Muslims are facing, and to correct it we must fight the Americans. Pakistan Army and government are allies of the Americans that's why they are also our enemies", said a political worker from one of the villages. A shopkeeper, who was a regular listener to the militant ser-

mons, commented “They were not asking anyone directly to pick up arms against the government or evil but would narrate stories of the just government of *Hazrat Umar* (second caliph of Islam) and the story of Battle of Badr when 313 Muslims fought like lions against the infidels, the whole world was conquered by Muslims through their swords. Me and my family use to get so emotional that we would weep when we listened to them”.

Most of the respondents agreed that it was the strength of the narrators like Fazlullah, Shah Durran and Muslim Khan, who applied and mixed the religious angles with the cultural and social deprivations, that won the hearts and minds of the people in Swat. “He (Fazlullah) use to ride a black horse, carrying a sword and talking in the language of the common Swati, as he himself was a common man and knew what the common man understands. He had no issue of making the people understand what he wanted them to understand”, said a retired principal from Mingora city. Confusion was created in the minds of Swati people, when the initial attractive and enchanting narrative took the shape of a violent ideology, where militants were acting as the decision makers. Interestingly, the respondents themselves were not clear about exactly went wrong. Most of the respondents were trying to explain the militancy in Swat in terms of a conspiracy theory, where the militants were playing in the hands of someone else. None of the respondents was ready to accept any guilt or share any responsibility for the success of the militants. Data reveals that militants started their narrative from simple religious sermons, where they were calling people to the path of Allah to attain a better life in this world and the hereafter. The militants attracted the attention of the masses through their interaction, which were purely religious. Respondents, especially the women, were of the opinion that no one at that time doubted the purity of their narrative. All respondents equated the militants’ message more with the Waali era governance rather than with Al-Qaeda’s narrative.

From the responses, we see that it is likely that early on the Swati people misjudged the militants and their narrative. When we study the speeches and the interaction of the militants, their utterances were purely Islamic, but their actions were purely political in nature. People of Swat were ready to accept their religious dogmas, but they could not reconcile themselves with the militants’ political agenda that resulted later in the public’s disfavor. Interestingly, the narrative was delicately blended with political motives of TNSM in such a way that people were directed towards the Waal e Swat era, even without naming him. This is in line with Quiggin, (2009) (11) who explained that militants always identify and stress traditional politics around issues such as injustice, poverty, access to resources, exploitation and corruption to attract the public’s attention. At the same time, the trick which narrativity plays i.e. “hermeneutics” of the people played a role in the success of militants’ narrative. While Fazlullah was aggressive and focused in his communications (unlike *Sufi* Muhammad), the Swati people did not interpret from his narrative exactly what he was saying, rather they

interpreted what they (people) imagined. Within no time, the militants’ narrative moved beyond mere religious teachings and entered into political domain, yet people failed to visualize its repercussions. The militants’ narrative in Swat mixed their religious identity with their political agenda in such a manner that locals were accepting all their gestures with religious justification even if they were purely political.

From the very beginning, militants were objecting to the judicial system and the governance issues in Swat, which meant militants wanted a new political system to be governed by them. The judicial system of *Waal e Swat* is still remembered by Swati people, and the idea of a just ruler is identified and interpreted in Swat as the rule of *Waali e Swat* generally. Due to this memory, they can be easily beguiled by anyone alluding to a system of politics that might seem to be similar (when it was in fact not). Thus, as the social justice of *Waal e Swat* was remembered, a notion that the *Waali* state was an Islamic state was easily developed. That is probably the reason that locals in Swat did not hesitate to easily accept the militant narrative with its political facet. Militants knew, however, that internal and external forces would certainly comprehend their hidden agenda. That was the reason that, through their narrative, militants declared the state of Pakistan as an American stooge and a hurdle in the implementation of their brand of Islamic *Sharia*.

In summary, it is clear that the religious and political narrative which militants floated in Swat was so powerful and well-disguised that the local could not judge it, and, in between the confusion and atrocities, people found themselves prey to this narrative. Militants were successful in constructing a new reality for Swati people. The political goal of militants seemed to secure an independent area which had its connectivity with Afghanistan and could provide a safe haven to all the militants from other parts of the country. While the locals were given an impression that militants wanted to bring back the golden era of *Waal e Swat*, without formally stating it. How TTS leader and their commanders (who were local laymen and at best had some religious education) got training and acumen for designing this plan, or “Their Narrative”, is still debatable. Such high-level strategic planning from them was unexpected, ultimately confusing locals who blame foreign hands for the militancy in Swat. Resultantly, even after so much bloodshed, locals are more vocal about the conspiracy theories, rather than accepting the atrocities committed by local militants.

#### 4.3. *Militants’ Strategy of Steering their Narrative*

Data reveals that militants in Swat propagated their narrative in stages. In first stage they were only attracting the people to listen to the Word of Allah. Later, they started a kind of religious Q & A session with locals who would ask them question or present their problems and request replies in light of Islamic teachings. The third stage of militants’ narrative started when they asked for donations to construct an Islamic center at Imam Dheri. Respondents agreed that donations given by the people were enormous, which showed the pop-



ularity of the militants, who were certainly encouraged. The last stage of the militant narrative came when they used force to stop people from what they declared to be 'evil deeds'. The militants began adding things to their narration and, suddenly, the simple narrators became militant. "Islam came to nullify the falsehood, the sword was used against the infidels by Muslims, we are facing evil in the shape of present rulers and we can't get justice without fighting for it. If we supported them (militants), an ideal life was waiting for us", said a lawyer from Mingora city. Replying to the question of why people would listen to the FM radio in this modern age, most of the people were of the opinion that it was at first their choice but later it was forced on them for two reasons: Firstly, that all other means of information were mostly destroyed, and secondly, people used to listen to it as the militants use to threaten people and warn them on the FM radio channel. "I used to listen to it every day because I was scared that may be my name would be taken and then it would be my turn to die", said a private medical practitioner in Mingora city. "It was a very well-planned activity. Militants first persuaded people to do away with all the modern information tools like TV etc. Then they blasted the electrical power stations and used force to stop people watching TV. People were compelled to have only one means of information and that was their FM radio" said a composed young man and government employee from one of the villages. Similarly, police stations were destroyed and their records were burnt so that people easily go to the militants instead of police for help. This also helped the militants to easily sell their narrative.

In Malakand Division, *Sufi* Muhammad started his narrative in Swat district for social justice and *Islamic Sharia* in early 1990s. Although local people supported him and he was successful in rallying people around him, his failure in his Afghan mission, where he took many volunteers to fight alongside Taliban regime in Afghanistan, made him less attractive to people. At the same time, *Sufi* Muhammad started his movement from another level of social and cultural understanding in Swat, rather than methodically from the grassroots. Thus, while his demands were popular, his groundwork was not very convincing. When Fazlullah and his followers came to the forefront in Swat, they did not demand anything from anyone, but rather started using the loudspeakers and later the FM radio to simply narrate the Islamic injunctions related to a pious life. According to Austin, words do not only have a contextual meaning or say something specific, but they are actions, provided that they fulfill certain conventions [37]. Fazlullah and his followers were saying things with religious meanings; however, their cultural and situation connections urged the locals in a new direction. As Harding [38] says, a narrator may go beyond the conventional scripts, leading people to see human happenings in a fresh way, indeed, in a way they had never before "noticed" or even dreamed of. This is exactly what militants did. The suffering and political problems of the people were equated with their non-religious attitudes and a fresh window of faith and good life was shown to them. Reality was reconstructed for the locals in

accordance with the wishes of the militants. It is important to note that the actions of militants regarding the demolishing of police stations, grid stations and TV and other media sources were very meticulous and timely. Militants were following a strategically thought-out procedure, while locals were considering them as simple *Mullah* (religious men) who wanted people to come back to religious ways. This mistake of misunderstanding the militants' real motives helped the militants to freely propagate their narrative while maintaining innocence. Similarly, peoples' confusion over how simple men from *Madrassa* (religious schools) could do this kind of planning remained permanently engraved in the minds of Swati people, who even now are not ready to believe that they were deceived by the militants. However, it was the novel method of communication, strategic thinking of destroying the other means of information and making people dependent on them for justice, that brought success to the narrative of militancy in Swat.

Although it is clear from the data that the narrative of the militants was well-planned, it was not itself developed by the militants in Swat. Well before the militants' success in Swat, militants had sanctuaries in different parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, which provided the Swati militant with an already well-prepared plan of action. The only obvious difference, which could be seen in the case of Swat, was the willingness of the people, which was even beyond the imaginations of Fazlullah himself. The memories of *Wali e Swat's* government makes the Swat case unique, where militants were saying one thing, people were listening to it in another mindset and were interpreting it in terms of the lost state of *Wali*, which made the task of militants easier.

#### 4.4. Political Agenda of Militants

Data reveals that militants in Swat kept their political agenda hidden from the locals. The narrative of the militants was coined in such a way that people could hardly understand their hidden motives.

"All they were fighting for was the cause of Allah against the infidels. We never thought along the lines that militants are using us for their own agenda. *Maulvi* Fazlullah was talking about Islam and the path of Allah and we were considering ourselves as soldiers of Allah" said a former accomplice of the militants, who was now jobless and scared, as everyone was looking towards him with suspicion. "Looking at these phenomena from any angle, the militants were trying to get political leverage. The whole thing was wrapped in the garb of Islam. Although, they were pointing towards the political issues of bad governance, and people were taking it as the will of Allah to follow them and get an ideal life", opined a university professor from Khwazakhela. "Fazlullah had the leverage of being a common man and part of the same society where he was now enjoying a power status. This gave him the upper hand because he was talking the same thing which he knew the society understands and wants. Memory of the good governance of *Wali e Swat* is commonly interpreted as *Sharia* in Swat, which was ex-

exploited by him”, said a retired senior Army officer from Mingora. All the respondents were of the opinion that the way in which militants constructed their narrative was acceptable to the masses, and, as a result, they were off-guard in front of the militants. Most of the respondents explained that, below the surface, everything that the militants were preaching was part of their political agenda, rather than any religious service. Respondents were unanimous about the fact that militants turned the minds of masses to the political ends while justifying their atrocities in the name of religion. This political agenda of militants only became obvious in its later stages, when they demanded the implementation of *Sharia* in Malakand Division, which was even accepted by the federal government. Respondents were of the opinion that by playing on the card of good governance, Fazlullah wanted to place himself as *Wali* of Swat under the garb of religiosity. Most respondents agreed that when the general masses realized the real agenda of the militants, they turned against them, but by then the brutality and power of the militants was beyond the limits of common people.

Militants never expressed their intentions for political power. They proceeded very methodically and attracted the attention of locals through their FM radio. The militants started preaching the values of Islam and then they started pointing towards the social ills, which are always present in every society. However, the militants equated it with the non-religiosity of the people and started giving their own solution in the name of religion. It was likely at this point that militants started unfolding their political agenda, without even mentioning it. Locals did not notice any shift from mere religious activity to political sphere and continued with their support of the militants. In summary, militants prepared ground for their narrative by making people to listen to what they wanted to say. Then, they made the people aware of the prevailing bad situation by explaining it in the context of religion. Next, they incorporated the social issues in religious sermons. People accepted the militants’ narrative and once that was done, the political decision-making of the area logically fell in the hands of militants. However, it is now clear that the militants were political from the very outset, and the locals who could not understand their motives could only be called naïve. The argument is that there was no question of Islamic government or implementation or even explanation of Islamic rules or text. From *Sufi* Muhammad to Fazlullah, it was always political and only religious to the extent that could make their claim valid or acceptable in Swat. Interestingly, in societies like Pakistan, governance issues are always present, and people are always open to those who promise to resolve them. Being an independent state, Swat under *Wali e Swat* enjoyed a period of good governance. The idealized era of the *Wali* and the historic realities in Swat shows that people there act cumulatively for social change when they are suffocated politically, economically or socially. Again, people in Swat have always welcomed a religious figure to lead them politically in times of crisis. Similar historic leverages cannot be found in any other area of Pakistan, which makes Swat naturally a fertile ground for militants and their agenda.

This mindset was well known to militants being locals from Swat and they manipulated it tactfully. With support of the local population, militants wanted to dominate the political scene in Swat and become forerunners of similar uprisings throughout the country. The militants’ sole concentration on the drawbacks in judicial system in Swat was aimed at playing on the memories of the effective judicial system of *Wali* times, which is still fresh in the minds of locals. Thus, without even referring to the *Wali*, militants cashed upon the local people’s hermeneutics. This propagation and actions of providing speedy justice alone can explain the political agenda that was a *Wali* kind of government in a *Wali* kind of “State of Swat”.

#### 4.5. Women and Militants’ Narrative in Swat

The majority of the respondents confirmed that militants tried their best to influence the female population through their speeches and were highly successful at it. The militants’ narrative accorded a new role to women in Swat and urged them to instigate their husbands and sons to support the militants. Respondents told that the new role and new window of importance that was given to the women in Swat by the militants created conducive environments for the militants’ narrative in Swat. Female respondents were of the opinion that militants tricked them and played with their religious emotions by exploiting their soft nature. The female education officer along with female teachers and female students during a group discussion revealed that the basic reason of militants’ popularity amongst the women in Swat was their sudden exposure to the militants’ narrative through FM radio, without a proper counter narrative or background knowledge.

“I used to wait for Falullah’s sermon on radio. I used to think that we have spoiled our lives as he used to tell stories of the sacrifices made by great female Companions during times of the holy Prophet (PBUH). Yes, I instigated my husband to go and contribute in the way of Allah with them “were the comments of a female schoolteacher, when asked about teachings of the militants. “I used to hear their FM radio when my kids would go to school in the initial days. Women would ask questions about daily life and they would answer in a very convincing manner. But later the FM radio became a means of listening to names of those who were persecuted or to be persecuted by the militants” said a female employee of a local NGO. “First when I started listening to their speeches through loudspeakers and then through FM, it was good. They used to tell the women especially about their rights in Islam. They used to say that women can spend money of their husbands without their permission in the way of Allah. I gave money to them as I was moved by their speeches”, said a female respondent.

Another woman disclosed with regrets that she contributed all of her jewelry as a donation for the cause of Islam. “I not only urged my husband to visit Imam Dheri to listen to the sermons of *Maulana Sahib*, but also forced my son to work as a laborer in the construction work at Imam Dheri Madrassah”, commented an elderly lady. Data

reveals that militants popularized their narrative by incorporating women but then punished and threatened women the most when they gained power.” I ran away along with my four daughters to Mardan, Allah saved us, but I cannot tell you the way we reached Mardan. Someone told me that they have mentioned our names on the radio that we were involved in Un-Islamic practices”, said a scared and reluctant lady singer. Data also revealed that besides public punishments for women, forced marriages were contracted at many places, even with underage girls, which is not openly expressed by the families even now due to cultural barriers in Swat. The scholars and administration segment of respondents were unanimous in their account that militants tried using the old tribal mentality to alienate females, starting from the local artists and extending to the girls’ educational institutions at later stage. Lawyers in the area confirmed that militants were justifying their acts against females by narrating religious and traditional norms of chastity and modesty.

It is important to note that in rural Swat, most women do not work outside their houses and normally they get their free time when the men go to work after breakfast in the morning. That time was then utilized by militants to gain access to women through their FM radio, using indoctrination tactics through their narrative. The female population was thus the first target that was exposed to the militants’ narrative. Militants indoctrinated women through their fiery speeches and Islamic injunctions with promises for rewards in hereafter and thus they got access to the family lives of Swati people. Militants used women not only to influence their male relatives, but also to get large amounts of money in the shape of donations for the Islamic cause. The cause of such blind trust was the motivational speeches of the militants specifically targeting women, which were mostly religious, mixed with some historic cultural events where women contributed in the interest of religion and society. The militants even declared that a wife can donate money without the permission of the husband and this act shall be rewarded by Allah in the hereafter. But when the militants got hold of Swat, it was the female population who suffered the most at the militants’ hands. The reasons behind the atrocities against women in Swat were many. Firstly, militants wanted to give a tough message to opponents that their women are vulnerable, which becomes a great source of worry in *Patkhtun* society. Secondly, the tribal-minded traditionalists started supporting militants’ acts against women, which looked more Islamic to them. Thirdly, to avoid public punishment, people started giving their female relatives in marriage contracts to militant commanders. Fourthly, this militant policy gave uniqueness and more power to militants and their narrative as people started believing that militants can do everything, and that going against them led to public humiliations.

## 5. Conclusion

Fazlullah exploited the situation in Swat by providing an ideological base for his presence. Instead of following the

rhetoric of Sufi Muhammad, he borrowed his ideology from Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban, blended it with local culture and developed a well thought-out localized narrative. He did not force his idea of *jihad* (Islamic concept of holy war) immediately, instead followed a stepwise approach. He established a mobile FM radio station and gave sermons on Islamic teachings, addressing women specifically. This increased the intensity of religious feelings in the whole locality, as women started urging their male relatives towards the militants’ narrative. With a ban on watching TV, the number of Fazlullah’s listeners increased manifold.

People were compelled to be exposed to militants’ narrative as FM remained the only source of information, when the electric power stations were bombed and announcements of Islamic punishments to the “evil doers” started on the radio. The next stage began when Fazlullah objected to the governance issues in the area. Fazlullah thus localized his narrative by making it a Swati model of *jihad*. This step led him to reconstruct the social reality in Swat by making his own rules to punish the evil. The political motives of Fazlullah were never questioned by locals as they were thinking in terms of the return of *Wali e Swat* days. It can safely be said then that militants in Swat were indirectly supported by locals, mesmerized by their narrative to establish a separate state on the model of *Wali e Swat*. Fazlullah’s personal whims started seeping into the social fabric of Swat. Hermeneutics played a dual role in Swat conflict for the local people. The narrative of Fazlullah convinced people in a way that they interpreted his message as true and relevant, while on other hand people interpreted the state’s narrative negatively. This whole phenomenon was never questioned by Fazlullah’s followers as narrativity says; verisimilitude was in action rather than the objective thinking in society. Thus, Fazlullah followed all the essential parts of a successful narrative, including relationality, causal employment, selective appropriation and temporality. The mastery of Fazlullah in constructing and selling his narrative, gathered masses around him in Swat and he remained preponderant for quite sometime in the whole area. Keeping in view the latent potential of militant narrative construction mechanisms and the vulnerability of the general masses in Pakistan specifically and the world in general where religious sentiments run high, this process cannot be discarded as one-time phenomenon. The use of soft power resources, construction of narratives and efforts to popularize them to gain massive public support can be used again by others subsequently to mobilize and initiate social change according to their whims. Serious policy options must be formulated based on further research findings to address the strategic mechanisms of militancy, rather than leaving it to chance.

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